



Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Fact Sheet

TOPIC: ORPHANED ANIMALS

BACKGROUND

Spring is filled with new life in Wisconsin's great outdoors. It is also during this time of year that we receive numerous questions and inquiries about young animals that seem to be abandoned, injured, or in need of help. The following is a brief guide to help navigate through these situations.

How can I help orphaned wildlife?

The best policy is to leave the animals alone. Most of the young animals encountered in the wild are not orphaned or abandoned. Their mother may be hidden nearby or will return shortly. Below are a few examples of the habits of several common Wisconsin species which you may encounter.

Eastern Cottontail Rabbit

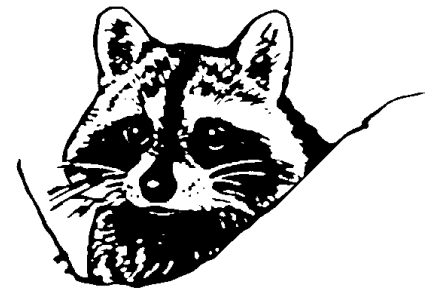
Rabbits only feed their young at dawn and dusk so the mother will never be at the nest during the day. A rabbit nest is a small depression in the ground, lined with grass or fur. The young rabbits grow quickly and will leave the nest within two to three weeks. If a small rabbit is seen outside of a nest with its eyes open and ears standing up, the rabbit is most likely on its own.

White-Tailed Deer

Fawns will move very little their first few weeks, relying on their nearly scentless condition and spots for camouflage. During this time the mother is not in constant contact with the fawn but will return frequently to nurse. By being in a different area, the mother may also be diverting a predator's attention away from the fawn. Fawns can walk shortly after birth but won't begin to follow their mother until about one month of age. At six to nine weeks the fawns are weaned.

Raccoons and Squirrels

Both squirrels and raccoons use trees to nest in. Squirrels will use tree cavities or build a nest out of leaves. A raccoon will also nest in tree cavities as well as caves, brush piles, rock crevices, and buildings. Mothers of both species will retrieve their young when they fall out or wander away from the nest.



Opossum

Young opossum do not leave the mother's pouch until two months of age. At four months of age when they are approximately seven to nine inches from snout to rump, they leave the mother and are independent.

Waterfowl

Ducklings are often seen when the mother is leading them to water. They may be seen in areas that seem unsafe but it is best to allow the ducks to find a way on their own. The hen will stay with her brood until the ducklings are able to fly, approximately two months after hatching.

Songbirds and Birds of Prey

Nestlings, which lack feathers and are covered with down, may fall out of the nest. If the nest is easily accessible place the bird back in their nest. Birds have a poor sense of smell and minimal handling will not cause abandonment. When the birds are fledglings they are fully feathered but not expert fliers yet. They may leave the nest and hop along branches or the ground. If a bird is seen in this state they are fine and the adult birds will continue to care for the young bird.

How can I prevent orphans?

There are several ways to help protect young animals:

- Check for nests before cutting down trees, brush, or mowing. If possible, farmers should push back the spring cutting of hayfields until July 15th to help protect grassland nesting birds and waterfowl.
- Keep pets indoors or on a leash to prevent injury to wildlife.
- Place caps on chimneys, vents, and window wells to prevent animals from nesting there.
- Educate children to respect wild animals and not to harass or catch them.
- Slow down when driving and keep your eyes open for wildlife, especially at dawn and dusk.

What is the law on assisting wildlife?

Other than a few species which are allowed to be possessed without a license, no person may possess live native wild animals without a license or permit from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), or a migratory bird without a permit from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). All native migratory birds are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which prohibits possession without a USFWS permit. If it is absolutely necessary to help a young animal that is injured or its mother has been killed, a person may legally have the animal in their possession for up to twenty-four hours for the purpose of transporting the animal to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator or for release in a more appropriate location. Many wildlife rehabilitators will capture and transport the animal themselves. To get the name of a wildlife rehabilitator in your area contact your local DNR service center. For a list of DNR service centers visit the website dnr.wi.gov or call the DNR Bureau of Wildlife Management at 608-266-8204.

Is there a risk associated with assisting wildlife?

Some of the wildlife encountered can transmit diseases to humans. Even young animals can bite or cause injury, which is how many diseases can be transmitted to humans. The best way to protect yourself and the animal is to avoid contact. For more information about diseases see the zoonotic disease fact sheets available at dnr.wi.gov.

Remember

Most young animals that seem abandoned do not need help. Animals take care of their young in a variety of ways, and what may be seen as abnormal behavior is just a part of the animal's routine. A young animal should never be removed from the wild unless absolutely necessary.



Graphic By: Mark Müller